EMOTIONAL COMPETENCIES

FOCUS & MINDFULNESS

SHARINGOALS

THE SYSTEMIC COACHING MANUAL
FOR FOOTBALL COACHES
AROUND THE WORLD

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1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1.1. Scientific research

1.1.1. Definition

The concepts of mindfulness, concentration, and focus have been used by several professional athletes highlighting the importance of these concepts for their career, however, especially the term mindfulness often appears to be elusive although gaining significant popularity (Mikulas, 2011, p. 1). Mindfulness is the English translation for the Pali term 'sati' meaning awareness, remembering, and attention. The concept is derived from the 2500-year-old tradition of Buddhist psychology but has been modified in Western culture (Siegel et al., 2009, p. 17).

While many definitions circulate in existing literature, some bear significant similarities. Mikulas (2011, p. 2) defines mindfulness as "a behaviour of the mind" which includes "the active maximizing of the breadth and clarity of awareness" and involves the movement and sharpening of the focus of awareness. This definition already suggests the interlinkage between the concepts of mindfulness, concentration and focus. But what does 'focus' mean exactly? Aherne et al. (2011, p. 177 in Hopper, 2017, p. 7) believe focus to be "the capacity to concentrate on the challenge at hand, while dismissing disturbances". While literature on mindfulness often discusses the concept of concentration and focus, it would be fatal to assume the concepts to be one and the same.

Mindfulness is often described using the term awareness, therefore highlighting its non-judgmental character. Mindfulness simply observes where the mind is going, it involves a broad focus and quickly notices changes within the mind. Thereby, it is not attempting to achieve anything (Grewal, 2014, p. 35). Rather than mindfulness rejecting or accepting something, it observes the rejecting or accepting that is done by other parts of the mind (Mikulas, 2011, p. 3). Concentration on the other hand is attentional focus and includes "one's ability to direct attention toward relevant information in the environment, sustain that attention over time, and change the direction of that attention when appropriate" (Weinberg & Gould, 2015, in Monsma et al., 2017, p. 51). The authors therefore suggest that concentration exists of three parts; the direction of attention, sustaining that attention and, when necessary, changing the attention onto another subject.

Grewal (2014, p. 33) emphasises that concentration means the focus on one object, single-mindedly, without any interruption making concentration a concept of exclusive focus. The mind is thereby occupied with one idea on which the mind is centred and ignores all other disturbances (Moran, 2008, p. 197). However, an important part of concentration is the focus on relevant information. Consequently, an individual needs to have the ability to decide which information is relevant and which is irrelevant (Weinberg & Gould, 1995, p. 334).

The author (Grewal, 2014) provides an example which attempts to provide a clearer understanding of the difference between mindfulness and concentration:

"If you have focused the mind on a stone, concentration will see only the stone. Mindfulness stands back from this process, aware of the stone, aware of the concentration focusing on the stone, aware of the intensity of that focus and instantly aware of the shift of attention when concentration is distracted." (p. 35)

Concentration can be developed by force, in contrast to mindfulness which requires a gentle effort to be made. Consequently, mindfulness is more difficult to develop than concentration as it reaches significantly deeper (Grewal, 2014, p. 35). When considering the concept of mindfulness, several authors define it as some form of awareness.

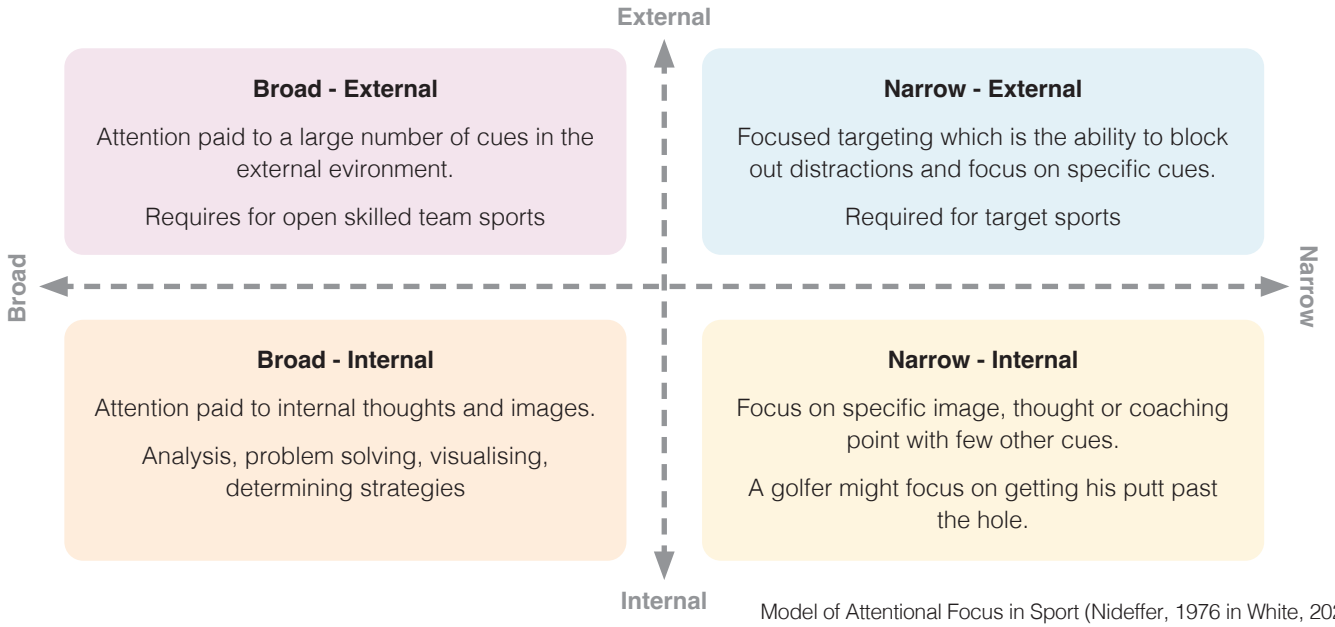
However, Siegel et al. (2009, pp. 18-22) argues that the concept is much more than passively being aware. Mindfulness includes the active work with states of the mind to remain peaceful when confronted with whatever happens. It is not about having nothing on your mind but being aware of what it is that is thought while noticing your emotions fully and vividly.

1.1.2. Scientific Research and Models

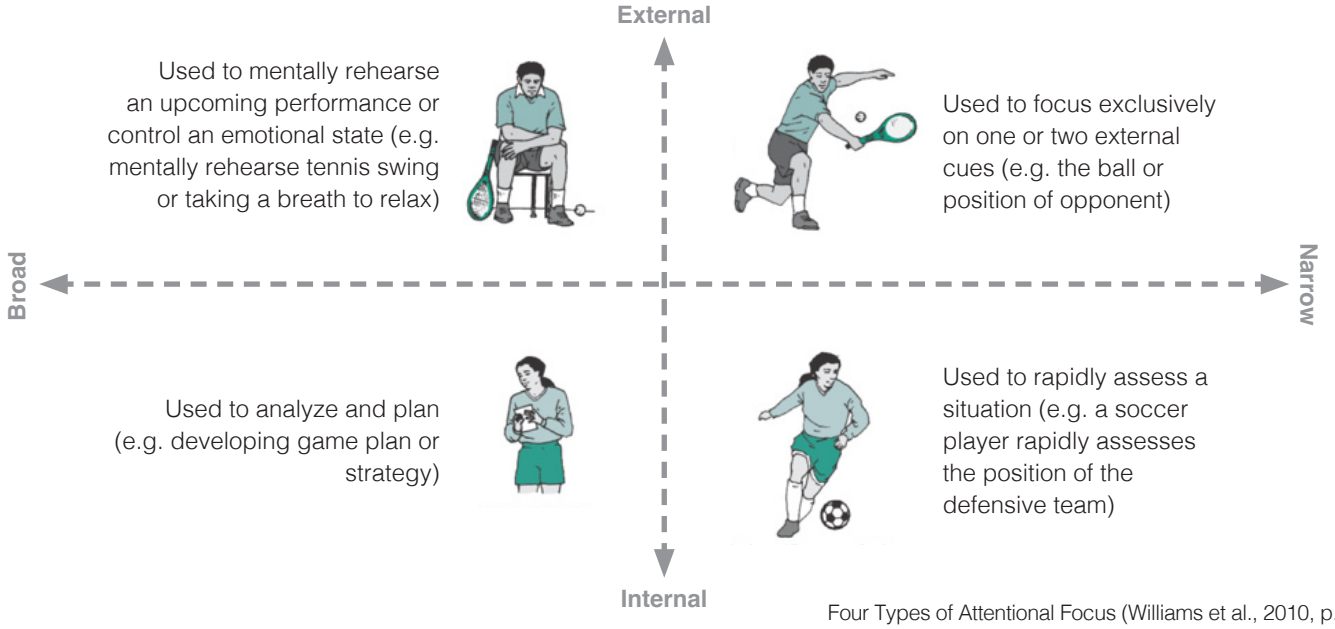
While some people may believe that one either concentrates or not, concentration is a more complex phenomenon. The sport psychologist Bob Nideffer has found four ways in which athletes focus their attention and some of these ways are more appropriate for specific sports and some may be less appropriate. Understanding these ways enables athletes to improve their concentration skills. There are two dimensions of attention, namely width referring to broad or narrow, and direction which can be either internal or external. A broad attentional focus thereby refers to the paying attention to many things, while a narrow focus refers to the paying attention of very few things. An internal attentional focus means being focused on one's thoughts and feelings, while an external focus means being focused on the external environment (Nideffer & Sharpe, 1978 in TeamUnify, n.d., p. 3).

Dependent on the type of sports that is to be executed, different attentional focuses are needed. For example, athletes in closed skill sports, such as swimming, tend to use a narrow-internal attentional focus. In football, however, more broad attentional skills are needed as the environment is rapidly changing and consequently athletes are required to perceive multiple occurrences at the same time. Additionally, more external attentional skills are needed as focus is mostly on the outward object – the football ball (Weinberg & Gould, 1995, pp. 336-337; TeamUnify, n.d., p. 4).

However, a narrow or/and internal attentional focus may be required at times as well, such as when a football player takes a penalty and remembers the last times, they had been successful and takes in some deep breaths. Afterwards, the attentional focus shifts to external when the player shoots the ball (Weinberg & Gould, 1995, pp. 336-337).



Model of Attentional Focus in Sport (Nideffer, 1976 in White, 2021)



Four Types of Attentional Focus (Williams et al., 2010, p. 9)

1.1.3. Impact on performance

As the previous section has already suggested, concentration is relevant for athletes involved in football. However, mindfulness is of similar importance. Mindfulness is relevant in multiple situations when playing sports where one becomes involved in the moment. Athletes often describe feelings of 'being in the zone' which similarly show levels of deep focus, connection of body and mind, and relaxation (Hopper, 2017, pp. 2-3).

Therefore, it can be significant for athletes to train mindfulness to experience more situations of being in the zone during football matches. Additionally, Rechtschaffen (2014, p. 4) argues that through practicing mindfulness, an athlete's attentional ability, emotional regulation, and immune response are improved which are all of relevance in sports. However, mindfulness can also have broader health benefits which can influence an athlete's performance on the field, such as reduced stress and anxiety achieved through increased emotional stability (Rechtschaffen, 2014, p. 4; Longshore & Sachs, 2015, p. 130 in Hopper, 2017, p. 3).

The goal of mindfulness in sports, and more specifically in football, is consequently to enable players to be in the zone or attain their flow while being present in the moment, as often as possible and equip them to be able to adapt and respond to changes on the field (Mumford, 2015, p. 45 in Hopper, 2017, p. 7). Weare (2013, p. 149) additionally argues that, because players become more present in the moment, their levels of anxiety decreases, which results in an improved performance on the football field. When athletes are able to stay in the present moment, they become aware of how they can deal with events using automatic responses but are not constrained by their automatic responses (Thompson & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008, p. 396). Not only does mindfulness improve an athlete's performance on and off the field, but it can also enhance the enjoyment in sport leading to athletes prolonged participation in the sport (Hopper, 2017, p. 30).

Faeder (2022, pp. 19-21) reviewed a selection of articles on the use of mindfulness and meditation in competitive sports practices with children. He found that mindfulness can lead to increased performance on the field and the acquisition of valuable psychological skills off the field. Consequently, the author argues that using mindfulness training in a sport, or football setting, might bring benefits that are not available when attempting to teach mindfulness to children outside of sport.

Concentration is similarly important in football. The importance in sports and football is not only shown through existing research but also by professional football players themselves. After Petr Cech, the national goalkeeper of the Czech Republic, managed to not receive a goal for 24 consecutive games for this club Chelsea in 2005, he said that "everything is about concentration" (Szczepanik, 2005, p. 100 cited in Moran, 2008, p. 195).

Indeed, it seems as if attentional focus, or concentration, can result in the difference between success and failure (Moran, 2008, p. 195). During competitive sports, athletes are confronted with two kinds of disruptions that can influence their concentration and ultimately their performance, internal and external disruptions. While external disruptions are objects in the athlete's immediate environment, internal disruptions include the athlete's feelings, thoughts, or sensations on the body (Moran, 1996 in Moran, 2008, p. 201). Examples of typical concentration problems are the thinking of past events or future events which oftentimes lead to concentration errors. Focusing on too many cues and, for instance trying to impress spectators, or overanalysing body mechanics are other typical concentration problems (Weinberg & Gould, 1995, pp. 340-341).



But why is concentration specifically important in football? Monsma et al. (2017, pp. 51-52) believe concentration to be of importance for maintaining mental toughness during football, where athletes need to be able to concentrate on key features of the game. During offensive strategies, such as passing the ball quickly or moving into an open space, an athlete requires to focus on such key features as timing, the positioning of the opponent, or the force put behind the ball. Especially in a complex environment such as a football match in which the context continuously changes, it can be fatal to focus on the wrong aspect. Therefore, concentration can support athletes in identifying the relevant cues on the field, such as inside cues (thought, emotions) and outside cues (environmental stimuli) (Monsma et al., 2017, pp. 51-52).

Building up on relevant literature on attention and concentration in sport, Moran (2008, pp. 203-204) defines five principles on how to effectively concentrate on the sports field.

- First, athletes must decide to concentrate as this does not happen by accident.
- This is followed by the "one thought" principle, the idea that one can consciously only focus on one thing. However, this does not apply to actions that have been practised to an extent where they do not require conscious effort to be executed.
- Thirdly, an athlete's mind is the most focused when their thoughts and their actions align, meaning when they think about what they are doing.
- Fourth, athletes are losing their concentration when their mind is focused on factors outside of their possible control.
- Lastly, when athletes get nervous and can feel their concentration moving away from their current action, a focus should be put outwards on the specific actions rather than inwards on doubts or fears.

1.1.4. Impact on social cohesion

While mindfulness can have significant positive effects on an individual, Baer (2003, p. 127) additionally argues that a mindful team is better able to work together, therefore improving team performance.

While focus is often regarded as an individual psychological skill, football is fundamentally a collective game in which players must continuously coordinate their attention with teammates. Tomasello (1995) introduced the concept of joint attention as the ability of two or more individuals to intentionally direct their attention towards the same object or event. He argues that this shared attentional process represents a fundamental building block of human cooperation because it enables individuals to understand shared intentions, coordinate their actions and learn from one another. Within football, joint attention allows players to recognise common cues, anticipate teammates' actions and respond collectively to the constantly changing demands of the game.

Building on Tomasello's work, Birse (2024) argues that many successful actions in team sports cannot be explained solely by the individual perception or decision-making of players. Instead, coordinated team performance emerges because teammates continuously monitor one another while simultaneously attending to the same relevant information in the environment. Successful pressing, defensive organisation and attacking combinations therefore depend not only on individual concentration, but also on players recognising the same opportunities for action and responding together. Birse describes this process as joint attention in action, emphasising that teammates constantly adapt their own attentional focus according to the attention of others.

This shared attentional process directly influences communication and tactical coordination.
When players identify the same relevant cues, communication becomes more timely, decisions become more predictable and coordinated movements become easier to execute. Rather than reacting independently, teammates develop a shared understanding of the evolving game situation, enabling them to anticipate each other's behaviour and act collectively. Birse (2024) therefore argues that effective team performance emerges through continuously shared perception and coordinated action rather than isolated individual decision-making.

Mindfulness research further supports the relationship between attention and social functioning. Baer (2003) concluded that mindfulness is associated with improvements in empathy, emotional regulation

and interpersonal relationships, while Goodman and Greenland (2009) reported that mindfulness interventions enhance social awareness, emotional understanding and positive interactions among young people. By increasing players' awareness of both themselves and others, Focus & Mindfulness may therefore contribute to more constructive communication, greater understanding of teammates' perspectives and stronger interpersonal relationships within the team.

Additional evidence for the importance of shared attention comes from research on collective learning systems. Drawing directly on Tomasello's theory of joint attention, Lee et al. (2021) demonstrated that groups coordinating their attention towards the same relevant information learned more quickly, solved complex problems more effectively and achieved higher levels of coordinated performance than groups acting independently. Although conducted within multi-agent learning rather than football, the authors' findings reinforce the broader principle that coordinated attention facilitates collective learning and cooperation. These findings closely reflect the demands of football, where players must continually identify common cues, coordinate their responses and adapt together during rapidly changing game situations.

Taken together, the work of Tomasello (1995), Baer (2003), Goodman and Greenland (2009), Birse (2024) and Lee et al. (2021) suggests that Focus & Mindfulness extends beyond an individual psychological competence. In football, individual attentional control develops into shared attention, enabling players to communicate more effectively, anticipate teammates' actions, coordinate tactical behaviour and respond collectively under pressure. Developing Focus & Mindfulness therefore contributes not only to individual performance but also to stronger team cohesion, more coordinated team behaviour and a collective environment in which players are better able to learn and perform together.

Within the Sharing Goals framework, Focus & Mindfulness serves as a bridge between Integrated Player Development and Team Development. Developing players who can intentionally direct and regulate their own attention provides the foundation for shared attention, enabling teammates to recognise common cues, communicate effectively and coordinate their actions. As individual focus develops into collective attention, teams become better equipped to solve problems together, execute tactical principles and maintain cohesion under pressure.



1.1.5. Correlations with private and family life, academic and work career

The benefits of Focus & Mindfulness extend well beyond sport and have been demonstrated across multiple areas of everyday life. Research consistently shows that mindfulness strengthens attentional control, emotional regulation and self-awareness, enabling individuals to cope more effectively with personal challenges, engage more successfully in learning environments and perform more effectively in professional settings. As these competencies are transferable across contexts, mindfulness can contribute to healthier relationships, improved academic performance and enhanced workplace well-being throughout the lifespan.

Within private and family life, mindfulness has been associated with greater psychological well-being, healthier relationships and increased resilience. By encouraging individuals to observe their thoughts and emotions without immediate judgement or reaction, mindfulness can reduce stress, anxiety and emotional distress while promoting emotional balance and psychological flexibility (Baer, 2003; Naik et al., 2013; Parkins, 2014). Research also reports improvements in self-awareness, self-esteem, empathy and interpersonal functioning, suggesting that mindfulness can strengthen the quality of social interactions and enable individuals to respond more constructively to interpersonal challenges (Weare, 2013; Shonin et al., 2014; Tierney, 2020). These benefits may support healthier family relationships by promoting calmer communication, emotional understanding and more adaptive responses to everyday stress.

Evidence also demonstrates important benefits within educational settings. Mindfulness can improve attentional control, concentration and emotional self-regulation, all of which are fundamental to effective learning (Weare, 2013; Quek et al., 2021; Saputra et al., 2024). School-based mindfulness programmes have been associated with reductions in anxiety, behavioural difficulties and test anxiety, alongside improvements in attention, classroom behaviour and emotional well-being (Broderick & Metz, 2009; Weare, 2013). Furthermore, mindfulness has been shown to support reading comprehension, memory performance and learning concentration while helping students manage academic stress and remain engaged during learning activities (Eisenbeck et al., 2018; Quek et al., 2021; Saputra et al., 2024). Collectively, these findings suggest that mindfulness can create favourable conditions for both academic achievement and positive personal development within educational environments.

Mindfulness also offers meaningful benefits within professional settings. Research indicates that mindfulness practice can reduce perceived stress, support emotional regulation and improve psychological well-being among employees (Greeson, 2009; Ramos & Gonçalves, 2016; Whomsley et al., 2022). Greater self-awareness and non-judgemental attention may also contribute to more considered decision-making, improved interpersonal communication and more positive workplace relationships (Baer, 2003; Casmar, 2015; Whomsley et al., 2022). In addition, mindfulness may support work engagement and productivity by helping individuals remain focused, respond more thoughtfully under pressure and maintain their psychological health in demanding professional environments (Siegel & Corliss, 2013; Anithalakshmi, 2023).

Across these different life domains, a consistent pattern emerges. Although the specific outcomes differ according to context, mindfulness repeatedly supports the underlying competencies of attention regulation, emotional regulation, self-awareness and psychological resilience. These competencies enable individuals to build healthier relationships, learn more effectively and function more sustainably in their professional lives. Consequently, Focus & Mindfulness should be regarded not only as a competence that supports sporting performance, but also as a lifelong skill that contributes to personal well-being, academic development and sustainable performance across everyday life.

1.1.6. Development of responsibility & integrity

Focus and Mindfulness are not fixed personality traits but trainable competencies that develop through repeated and intentional practice (Mikulas, 2011, p. 3; Siegel et al., 2009, p. 22). Like any other competence, their development requires repeated learning experiences over time. Each time individuals notice their attention wandering and deliberately return it to the present moment, they strengthen the underlying processes responsible for attentional control, self-awareness and emotional regulation. From a neurobiological perspective, repeated experiences gradually strengthen the neural pathways involved in these processes, making mindful attention increasingly natural and automatic (Siegel, 2010).

The development of Focus & Mindfulness can be understood as a progressive process. Initially, individuals become aware that their attention frequently shifts between thoughts, emotions, sensations and external distractions without conscious intention. The first developmental step is therefore learning to notice where attention currently is. Once distractions are recognised, attention can be redirected towards what is relevant. Through repeated practice, individuals gradually become capable of sustaining attention for longer periods while remaining aware of changing internal and external experiences. Finally, these skills become increasingly transferable, allowing players to maintain attention, regulate emotions and make thoughtful decisions during complex and emotionally demanding situations, including football matches.

Unlike many psychological skills that are only practised during formal training sessions, mindfulness can be developed continuously throughout everyday life. Siegel et al. (2009, p. 23) distinguish between everyday mindfulness, formal meditation practice and retreat practice. Everyday mindfulness involves repeatedly bringing attention back to present-moment experiences during ordinary daily activities. Formal meditation intentionally dedicates time to practising awareness, while retreat practice involves extended periods of meditation under guided conditions. Because this manual focuses on youth football, everyday mindfulness and short, age-appropriate meditation exercises are considerably more relevant than retreat practice. Research suggests that integrating brief moments of mindful awareness into daily routines is often more effective than viewing mindfulness as an isolated activity practised only occasionally (Shonin et al., 2014).

Concentration provides an important foundation for the development of mindfulness. During concentration practice, attention is intentionally directed towards a selected object and repeatedly returned whenever the mind becomes distracted. Through this repeated process, individuals learn to ignore irrelevant stimuli, reduce unnecessary physical tension and maintain attention on information that is important in the present moment (Orlick, 1990, as cited in Moran, 2008, p. 208). Concentration can be developed through many different activities, including listening carefully to sounds, observing breathing, following movement or maintaining attention during technical football exercises. Although attentional control developed in one activity can transfer to other contexts (Mikulas, 2011, p. 2), football players also require opportunities to practise these skills within football-specific situations involving movement, teammates, opponents, fatigue and competitive pressure.

Mindfulness expands upon this attentional foundation. Whereas concentration primarily involves maintaining attention on one selected object, mindfulness encourages awareness of the continuous flow of thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations and environmental information without immediately judging or reacting to these experiences (Olendzki, 2009, pp. 38–43). Rather than attempting to eliminate distractions, mindfulness teaches individuals to recognise them, accept their presence and gently return attention to the present moment. Over time, this repeated process strengthens attentional flexibility, emotional regulation and self-awareness, enabling individuals to respond more thoughtfully instead of reacting automatically.

Meditation remains one of the most common methods for developing both concentration and mindfulness. Olendzki (2009, p. 38) defines meditation as focusing the mind intentionally on a chosen object or experience. Initially, attention frequently wanders towards unrelated thoughts or external stimuli. However, repeated practice gradually increases the stability, clarity and endurance of attention. Concentration meditation primarily strengthens the ability to sustain attention on a single object, whereas mindfulness meditation develops awareness of the constantly changing experiences arising within and around the individual (Olendzki, 2009, pp. 38–43). Both forms of practice contribute to the development of attentional control and present-moment awareness.

Mindfulness can also be developed through movement-based experiences. Hopper (2017, pp. 7–8) identifies yoga as one effective method of combining breathing, movement and awareness, while Briegel-Jones et al. (2013, p. 349) highlight its contribution to concentration, body awareness and flexibility. Similar principles can easily be integrated into youth football through breathing exercises, balance activities,

mindful movement, body-awareness tasks or technical exercises performed with intentional attention. Rather than separating physical and mental development, these activities encourage players to develop both simultaneously.

Research further suggests that the development of mindfulness is strongly influenced by the surrounding learning environment. Children do not only learn mindfulness through direct instruction but also by observing calm, attentive and emotionally regulated behaviour demonstrated by coaches, teachers and parents (Shonin et al., 2014; Tierney, 2020). Coaches who consistently model present-moment attention, emotional regulation and thoughtful responses create learning environments in which mindfulness becomes part of everyday interaction rather than an isolated exercise. Consequently, the coach's own behaviour becomes an important component of players' mindfulness development.

As players gain greater attentional control, they become increasingly capable of applying these skills under pressure. Football-specific routines before training sessions, matches and set pieces help direct attention towards relevant cues while reducing unnecessary conscious control (Moran, 2008, p. 211). Likewise, post-mistake routines help players recognise emotional reactions, release them and deliberately refocus on the next action. Cue words and instructional self-talk further support attentional regulation by reminding players what deserves their attention in a specific moment (Moran, 2008, p. 213). These strategies become increasingly effective when they are practised consistently and embedded within everyday training.

Ultimately, the development of Focus & Mindfulness does not involve eliminating thoughts, emotions or distractions. Instead, players gradually learn to notice them without becoming controlled by them. Through repeated experiences, they strengthen their capacity to recognise distraction, redirect attention, sustain concentration and remain aware of changing situations. As these experiences accumulate over time, Focus & Mindfulness become increasingly integrated into everyday behaviour, enabling players to perform with greater clarity, emotional balance and adaptability both on and off the football field.



1.2. Window of opportunities

A window of opportunity describes a period in development when a competence, or the components underlying it, develops disproportionately faster than at other times. For Focus & Mindfulness the picture is unusual, because the competence rests on two capacities that follow two quite different developmental timetables.

For executive functions as a whole — the broader family of cognitive skills that includes working memory, inhibitory control and attentional flexibility — the clearest sensitive period identified in the developmental literature falls in early childhood, roughly between the ages of three and six, when foundational executive control develops faster than at any later point in life (Garon, Bryson, & Smith, 2008).

This window largely precedes the age at which players begin organised football within the Sharing Goals framework. By Stage 1, much of that foundational development has already taken place outside the football setting, which means coaches are building on a base they did not lay rather than creating it themselves.

Within the attentional components most relevant to Focus & Mindfulness — sustained and selective attention — the evidence points to a second, later window. Cross-cultural studies converge on a similar pattern: attentional performance improves rapidly between approximately six and ten years of age, after which further gains continue but at a substantially slower rate (Klenberg, Korkman, & Lahti-Nuuttila, 2001; Betts, McKay, Maruff, & Anderson, 2006).

This period of accelerated attentional development aligns closely with Stage 1 and Stage 2 of the Sharing Goals framework. Early, intentional emphasis on attentional practice during these stages may therefore support gains that are harder to achieve to the same degree later, which is why the simplest exercises in this chapter carry more weight than their simplicity suggests.

This does not mean older players cannot continue to improve. Mindfulness itself — the broader, non-judgemental awareness of thoughts, emotions and bodily sensations described earlier in this chapter — depends on higher-order self-regulatory and meta-cognitive capacities supported by the prefrontal cortex, which continues to mature well into early adulthood (Diamond, 2013). No comparable early window has been established for mindfulness as a broader competence; if anything, the theoretical understanding and self-directed practice expected in Stages 4 to 6 depend on capacities that only become fully available later in adolescence.

Taken together, the evidence points to a genuine, though partial, window of opportunity: the foundational attentional skills underpinning Focus & Mindfulness develop fastest during Stages 1 and 2, while the broader mindfulness competence continues to develop throughout adolescence without a comparably narrow window of its own.



1.3. Correlation with other skills and competencies



Correlation with Emotional Competencies
Focus & mindfulness provide a foundation for several emotional competencies. Self-control begins with noticing an impulse before acting on it. Coping with emotions requires first becoming aware of what is being felt. Self-reflection applies the same attention afterwards, helping players examine their behaviour, reactions, and choices and learn from experience.

Correlation with Physical Skills
Quick reactions and good positioning rely on attention. Focus helps players notice cues early, react faster, scan continuously, and stay aware of their position and surroundings.

Correlation with Technical Abilities
Technical execution depends on where attention is directed. First touch requires awareness of both the ball and next action, while accurate passing under pressure depends on maintaining attention on the intended target rather than the opponent.

Correlation with Social Competencies
Focus & mindfulness strengthen social interaction by helping players divide attention effectively. Communication requires listening to teammates while staying aware of play. Leadership also depends on presence: calm, focused players can steady those around them, helping the team maintain attention, composure, and connection.

Correlation with Cognitive Skills
Effective decision-making starts with directing attention to the right information. Quick decisions depend on noticing relevant cues early, while problem solving requires holding key information in mind long enough to assess options and choose a solution.

Correlation with Tactical Principles
Tactical awareness relies on sustained attention. Concentration helps defenders track the ball, space, and teammates simultaneously, while defensive cover requires attention to runners rather than only the ball. Both help players maintain organisation and respond effectively to danger.

1.4. Key learnings

- Mindfulness describes the maximising breadth and clarity of awareness and the non-judgemental observing of the behaviour of the mind
- Focus and Concentration are linked to each other where concentration describes the attentional focus on relevant information, the sustaining of this focus, and its redirection if necessary
- All three, mindfulness, focus, and concentration, can be improved through continuous practice
- Mindfulness has benefits for every age group such as cognitive change, improved self-management, relaxation, and an improved overall well-being
- Different styles of concentration are useful in different types of sports
- Through mindfulness, athletes are able to be in the present moment and keep ‘being in the zone’
- Concentration helps athletes identify the relevant cues necessary for success
- Concentration and mindfulness can be practised through meditation and everyday practices, such as routines or positive self-talk
- Mindfulness and concentration practices can be introduced at any age; however, it is of importance to start with simple exercises if children or adolescents have no experience with mindfulness or concentration exercises



1.5. From science to practice

The science reviewed in this chapter shows that Focus & Mindfulness develops through repeated, intentional practice rather than instruction alone: players must repeatedly notice where their attention is, redirect it, and sustain it in football-relevant situations before these processes become automatic. Because attentional and mindful awareness both mature alongside broader cognitive and social development, coaching emphasis must shift considerably across the six Sharing Goals stages.

Across the six stages, practice moves from short, concrete, externally-focused tasks toward longer, self-directed attention that includes awareness of one's own body, thoughts and emotions, and finally toward players who can sustain - and even model - this attention for others in any situation.

Stage 1
7-8 years



At this stage, attention is naturally brief and drawn to concrete, external things. Practice should be short, playful and centred on the immediate environment — the ball, a sound, a partner's instruction — with coaches expecting and normalising frequent lapses in concentration.

Stage 2
9-10 years



Players become more consciously aware of their own bodies and can sustain attention for longer. Practice can begin to divide attention between two simple tasks while remaining focused mainly on the external environment.

Stage 3
11-12 years



Meta-cognition begins to emerge - players can start to notice that their mind has wandered and deliberately bring it back. Practice should extend in duration and introduce the first structured moments of returning concentration to a primary task.

Stage 4
13-14 years



Players can sustain focus even with mild external disturbance and are ready for the first theoretical explanations of mindfulness and concentration, with group discussion of individual experiences becoming a valuable addition.

Stage 5
15-16 years



Awareness extends from the body to the mind itself, and longer, more structured meditation practices become appropriate. Players can maintain and return concentration in environments that include real disturbances.

Stage 6
17–18 years



Players are capable of sustaining attention in almost any situation and applying theoretical understanding independently. At this stage players can also begin to help create the calm, focused environment that supports concentration in others.

2. COACHES' BEHAVIOUR

2.1. Coaching style

2.1.1. Scientific grounding

Coaching behaviour is one of the strongest environmental influences on how players develop Focus & Mindfulness. Social learning theory explains that players learn attentional and emotional habits partly by observing how significant adults respond to distraction, pressure and mistakes, rather than only through direct instruction (Bandura, 1977). A coach who visibly loses focus, reacts impulsively to errors, or communicates urgency provides players with a model of scattered rather than regulated attention, regardless of what is said explicitly about concentration.

This modelling effect is supported by direct evidence from football coaching itself. Gibert, Planas and Torrents (2024) found that a structured mindfulness programme for football coaches significantly improved coaches' own mindfulness trait, interpersonal mindfulness and emotional regulation, with participants describing the skills as directly relevant to their professional role. This suggests that a coach's personal capacity for present-moment, non-judgemental attention is a practical precondition for teaching it convincingly, not an incidental extra.

Structured, coach-led training also produces measurable benefits in players themselves. Kittler, Arnold and Jekauc (2022) conducted a randomised controlled trial of a mindfulness-based programme with young elite athletes and found significant improvements in both sustained and selective attention, with greater training dosage producing larger gains. Their findings indicate that Focus & Mindfulness responds to deliberate, repeated coaching intervention in youth sport specifically, rather than developing only through general maturation.

Importantly, this training does not need to be lengthy to be effective. Zeidan, Johnson, Diamond, David and Goolkasian (2010) demonstrated that as little as four brief sessions of mindfulness training improved sustained attention, cognitive flexibility and mood in novice participants. For coaches working within limited training time, this supports integrating short, frequent moments of attentional practice into regular sessions rather than treating Focus & Mindfulness as a separate, time-intensive activity.

The broader motivational climate a coach creates also shapes attentional development. Task-oriented climates that emphasise effort, exploration and personal improvement are associated with lower anxiety and more adaptive engagement than ego-oriented climates that emphasise comparison and outcome (Ames, 1992). Because anxiety and self-evaluative pressure are known to narrow and disrupt attention, a coach's emphasis on mastery rather than comparison creates the psychological safety players need to practise attention without fear of judgement.

Autonomy-supportive coaching further strengthens this environment. Mageau and Vallerand (2003) describe how coaches who provide choice, acknowledge players' perspectives and avoid controlling language support intrinsic engagement and self-regulation. Applied here, this means allowing players some choice in how and when they practise attention rather than mandating a single method - consistent with the non-judgemental, non-forcing character of mindfulness itself.

Finally, coaches benefit from understanding that attention is not one uniform skill. Nideffer and Sharpe's (1978) model of attentional style describes attention as varying along two dimensions - broad versus narrow, and internal versus external - with football's rapidly changing, externally-oriented demands generally requiring broad, external focus punctuated by brief narrow-internal moments, such as before a penalty kick. Coaches who understand this can guide players toward the attentional style a specific situation actually requires.

Taken together, this evidence indicates that coaches shape Focus & Mindfulness through at least three interacting pathways: modelling regulated attention through their own behaviour and personal practice, structuring brief and repeated attentional training within realistic football situations, and creating a safe, autonomy-supportive climate in which players can practise attention without pressure or judgement.

2.1.2. Practical implications

Practically, this means the coach creates an environment in which players repeatedly practise directing, sustaining and redirecting their attention within realistic football situations, while experiencing the coach's own calm, non-judgemental presence as a model for what regulated attention looks like.

A coaching style that supports Focus & Mindfulness includes:

Modelling calm attention

- practising personal awareness of one's own attention before and during sessions
- responding to mistakes, delays or disruptions with visible composure rather than urgency
- pausing briefly before reacting to a disruptive situation rather than responding immediately
- narrating one's own refocusing in the moment (e.g. "let's reset and watch the next ball")
- avoiding multitasking or divided attention while communicating with players

Creating a non-judgemental environment

- treating wandering attention and boredom as normal rather than as a discipline problem
- allowing players to opt out of a specific practice if it does not suit them
- avoiding pressuring or forcing any player into mindfulness exercises they are uncomfortable with
- responding to "I couldn't focus" honestly rather than with criticism
- inviting players to notice and name distraction without judging it as good or bad

Structuring brief, repeated practice

- integrating short attention exercises into regular training rather than reserving separate long sessions
- repeating the same simple practices consistently so players recognise and anticipate them
- gradually increasing duration and difficulty only as players show readiness
- combining attentional practice directly with technical and tactical exercises rather than separating them
- using consistent cue words to prompt refocusing during normal training and matches

Involving the wider support network

- communicating with parents or caretakers about simple practices players can repeat at home
- inviting caretakers to join brief exercises before or after sessions where appropriate
- encouraging consistency between the calm environment created at training and at home
- sharing simple, age-appropriate language so caretakers reinforce rather than contradict coaching cues
- recognising that support outside football strengthens what is practised within it

2.2. Choice of words

Because mindfulness itself is a non-judgemental, non-forcing state, the coach's language matters more here than in almost any other competence: pressuring players to concentrate tends to increase the very anxiety that narrows attention, while calm, curious language invites players to notice and return their focus without fear of getting it wrong.

Stage 1
7-8 years



At this age, children's attention naturally wanders very often, so language should stay playful and reassuring rather than corrective. Short, external cues help young players return their focus without feeling like they have done something wrong.

Example tone:

- *"Notice the ball, then come back to me." (external redirection)*
- *"It's okay if your mind wandered - just come back." (non-judgemental reframe)*
- *"What did you notice just now?" (awareness prompt)*
- *"Eyes here, ball there - let's go!" (playful cue)*
- *"Great noticing - try it again!" (reinforcement)*

Stage 2
9-10 years



Focus: naming attention and simple redirection

Example tone:

- *"Where is your focus right now?" (attentional check)*
- *"Bring it back gently, no rush." (non-forcing redirection)*
- *"You caught it wandering - nice work." (reinforces self-monitoring)*
- *"Feel your feet, feel the ball." (body-based redirection)*
- *"One thing at a time - which one?" (simplifying divided attention)*

Stage 3
11-12 years



Focus: returning attention after it drifts

Example tone:

- *"Reset — what's the one thing that matters now?" (attentional reset)*
- *"Your mind wandered, that's normal, now return." (meta-cognitive normalising)*
- *"What pulled your focus away just then?" (reflective awareness)*
- *"Bring your attention back to your breath and go." (physiological anchor)*
- *"Notice it, don't judge it, just refocus." (mindfulness principle)*

Stage 4
13-14 years



Focus: understanding and naming the process

Example tone:

- *"What is mindfulness doing for you right now?" (conceptual reflection)*
- *"Notice the distraction, then choose your focus." (agency framing)*
- *"Stay with it, even when it's noisy." (sustained attention under disturbance)*
- *"You're building a skill, not just trying hard." (growth framing)*
- *"What helped you refocus that time?" (strategy awareness)*

Stage 5
15-16 years



Focus: independent regulation under real disturbance

Example tone:

- *"You know your process — trust it." (autonomy)*
- *"Let the distraction pass, then return." (acceptance-based language)*
- *"Where do you need your focus in this moment?" (situational awareness)*
- *"Stay present, whatever the scoreboard says." (present-moment framing)*
- *"Your focus is yours to direct." (ownership)*

Stage 6
17–18 years



Focus: leadership and creating focus for others

Example tone:

- *"How do you want to help others focus today?" (leadership framing)*
- *"Model it — they're watching how you reset." (peer modelling)*
- *"You can hold your focus in any situation now." (mastery affirmation)*
- *"What's your routine when things get chaotic?" (self-directed strategy)*
- *"Bring the team's attention back with you." (collective leadership)*

2.3. Body language

A coach's body language is often the clearest signal of whether calm, non-judgemental attention is genuinely valued or just spoken about. Because Focus & Mindfulness asks players to notice their own state without immediately reacting, a coach who visibly rushes, tenses or reacts sharply to disruption undermines the very quality they are trying to teach, regardless of the instructions given.

Conversely, a coach who visibly slows down, breathes, and responds to disruption with calm, deliberate movement demonstrates exactly the kind of regulated attention Focus & Mindfulness aims to build. Players are highly sensitive to these non-verbal cues, particularly in moments of mistake or distraction, making the coach's own composure one of the most powerful teaching tools available in this competence.

Eye Contact

- Use steady, unhurried eye contact rather than impatient scanning
- Avoid staring or pressuring eye contact during reflective exercises
- Use eye contact to signal calm presence rather than evaluation

Facial Expression

- Maintain a relaxed expression during practices and disruptions
- Avoid visible irritation when players lose focus or make mistakes
- Show genuine interest when players describe what they noticed



Gestures

- Use slow, deliberate gestures rather than quick or sharp ones
- Use a simple, consistent hand signal as a refocusing cue
- Avoid pointing or gesturing in frustration after a lost ball or mistake

Posture

- Adopt a relaxed, grounded posture, especially during calming exercises
- Avoid crossed arms, pacing or other tense, closed body signals
- Sit or kneel at the players' level during reflective or breathing exercises

Positioning & Distance

- Position close enough to offer quiet reassurance without being intrusive
- Give physical space during individual reflection or breathing exercises
- Avoid hovering directly over a player who is trying to refocus

3. TRAINING

THE DEVELOPMENT JOURNEY

of focus & mindfulness from foundation to maturity:



7-8 years

1. Hold attention on one simple task or partner for a short burst.
2. Name what they are paying attention to during an activity.
3. Come back to the activity after being distracted.



9-10 years

1. Hold attention on two things at once.
2. Notice when their attention has moved, and say so.
3. Return their attention without being prompted.



11-12 years

1. Use a cue of their own to bring attention back.
2. Shift attention deliberately between a wide and a narrow focus.
3. Describe what pulled their attention away.



13-14 years

1. Keep attention on the game through a mistake.
2. Explain why a focusing strategy works.
3. Notice a physical or emotional state without acting on it.



15-16 years

1. Adapt a focusing technique to what works for them.
2. Hold attention under competitive pressure.
3. Choose where to direct their attention before a decisive action.



17-18 years

1. Regain focus within the same passage of play after a setback.
2. Keep a settled state that teammates can read.
3. Lead a short focusing routine for the group.

Training

7-8 years



3.1. Stage 1 (7-8 years)

3.1.1. Stage characteristics

At this age, attention is naturally brief and strongly drawn to concrete, external things - the ball, a sound, a bright cone. Players can sustain focus on one simple task for only a few minutes and find it difficult to filter out distractions. At the same time, they enjoy game-like attention challenges and respond well to humour, short bursts of activity, and clear, descriptive instructions rather than abstract explanation.

3.1.2. Specific learning objectives

At this stage, players are just beginning to notice their own attention and to experience simple ways of bringing it back when it wanders.

In the reflection phase, we want the children to be able to:

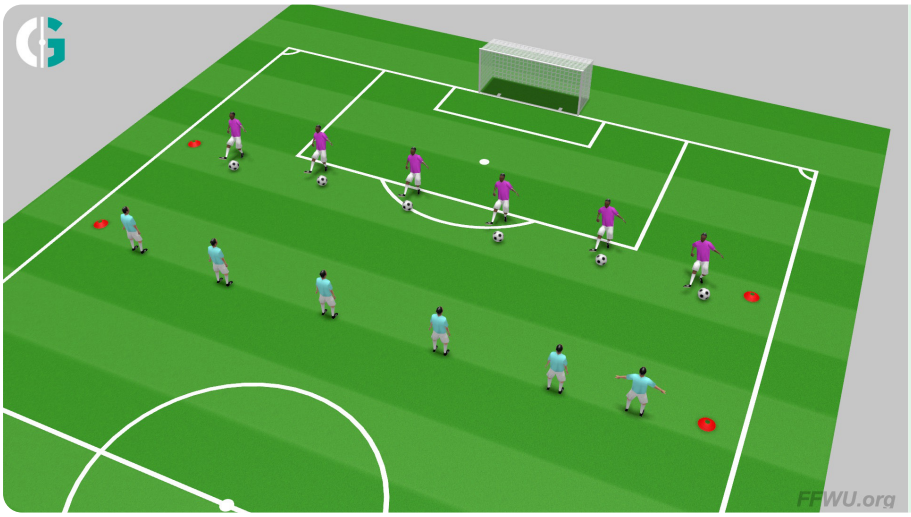
1. Hold attention on one simple task or partner for a short burst.
2. Name what they are paying attention to during an activity.
3. Come back to the activity after being distracted.

3.1.3. Coach insight

At this age attention drifts quickly, and that is a feature of the age rather than a discipline problem. Instructions need to be short, concrete and playful, and lapses should be expected rather than corrected. What matters is the return: a player who notices they have drifted and comes back has done exactly what the exercise asks of them.

EXERCISE

OPPOSITE FOOT PASS



Players	4+
Age	07–08 09–10 11–12 13–14 15–16 17–18
Pitch	10 x 10 m
Equipment	1 ball per pair, 4 cones
Duration	total: 15 min play: 12 min breaks: -
Author	SJ Weber

Description

- Put players into pairs, one ball per pair, spaced out across small grids.
- Players pass the ball back and forth; the receiving player calls „left“ or „right“ before each pass.
- The passer must do the opposite of what is called - if „right“ is called, the pass is played with the left foot.
- Change which player calls the instruction every few minutes.
- Variations:
  - Players call the instruction after receiving the ball instead of before.

Coaching Tips

1. Prepare players to expect that their **attention will wander - this is normal**, not a mistake - and notice out loud when a player catches themselves drifting and refocuses.
2. Introduce a simple **cue word such as “eyes up”** that players can use to bring their own focus back.
3. Afterwards, ask players **what helped them hear the instruction in time**, reinforcing that noticing the drift is the skill.

	Learning Objectives	Reflection Questions
1	Players keep watching their partner for the whole of their turn.	○ *Were you always able to keep watching your partner?* ○ *What helped you stay with the drill?* ○ *How long could you hold it before your attention moved?*
2	Players say what they were listening for before the pass was played.	○ *What were you focused on right before you heard the call?* ○ *Were you listening to the word or watching the foot?* ○ *What did you notice just before you played the wrong foot?*
3	Players come back to the drill after playing the wrong foot.	○ *How quickly could you come back after getting one wrong?* ○ *What did the coach say that helped you refocus?* ○ *What did you do straight after the mistake?*

Training

9-10 years



3.2. Stage 2 (9-10 years)

3.2.1. Stage characteristics

Players are becoming more consciously aware of their own bodies and can sustain focus for longer than in Stage 1, typically up to around ten minutes. They are ready for their first simple understanding of what concentration means, and can begin to divide attention between two straightforward tasks, although this remains challenging and attention still relies heavily on external, physical cues.

3.2.2. Specific learning objectives

At this stage, players are becoming more aware of their own bodies and can begin to hold attention across two things at once, not just one.

In the reflection phase, we want the children to be able to:

1. Hold attention on two things at once.
2. Notice when their attention has moved, and say so.
3. Return their attention without being prompted.

3.2.3. Coach insight

This is often the first stage where players can knowingly practise paying attention as a skill rather than simply following instructions. Divided-attention tasks should be introduced gradually, and one task will usually be dropped the moment the other becomes difficult. That is what learning to split focus looks like, not a failure, and saying so out loud keeps players willing to try.

EXERCISE

DOUBLE-FOCUS CHALLENGE



Players	5+
Age	07–08 09–10 11–12 13–14 15–16 17–18
Pitch	8 x 8 m
Equipment	1 ball and 1 balloon per group
Duration	total: 15 min play: 12 min breaks: -
Author	SJ Weber

Description

- Form groups of around five players, each group with one ball and one balloon.
- The group passes the ball around on the ground using their feet.
- At the same time, the group must keep the balloon in the air using their hands.
- Set a timer and challenge the group to keep both going as long as possible.
- Adaptation: pass the ball through the air without it touching the ground for an added challenge.

Coaching Tips

1. Before starting, ask players which task they think will be harder to keep attention on, **to prime awareness** of divided attention.
2. When the balloon or ball is dropped, use it as **a noticing moment rather than a mistake** - ask which task pulled their focus away.
3. Encourage players to **briefly glance between both tasks** rather than fixating on only one.

	Learning Objectives	Reflection Questions
1	Players keep the ball moving on the ground and the balloon in the air at the same time.	○ *Did you manage to keep both going for the whole time?* ○ *Which task pulled your attention more, the ball or balloon?* ○ *What happened to the ball when the balloon started to fall?*
2	Players say when their attention moved fully onto one of the two tasks.	○ *Did you notice your mind going to only one task?* ○ *What did you do when both needed attention at once?* ○ *Which one did you drop first?*
3	Players bring their attention back to the neglected task without being told.	○ *Did you bring yourself back, or did someone remind you?* ○ *What helped you keep your attention on both tasks?* ○ *How did the group work out who watched what?*

Training

11-12 years



3.3. Stage 3 (11-12 years)

3.3.1. Stage characteristics

Players are increasingly able to notice when their mind has wandered and to deliberately bring it back — an early form of meta-cognition. They can sustain concentration for longer periods, approaching twenty to thirty minutes, and awareness begins to extend from the external environment to their own body and internal state.

3.3.2. Specific learning objectives

At this stage, players are learning to notice, by themselves, when their concentration has drifted, and to deliberately bring it back to the game.

In the reflection phase, we want the children to be able to:

1. Use a cue of their own to bring attention back.
2. Shift attention deliberately between a wide and a narrow focus.
3. Describe what pulled their attention away.

3.3.3. Coach insight

Players at this stage are ready to be taught the idea of returning attention, rather than only being redirected by the coach. Naming the two steps — noticing the drift, then choosing to come back — is what moves the skill from the coach to the player. Once players can describe the process, they can use it without being prompted.

EXERCISE

THE NUMBER GAME



Players	12+
Age	07–08 09–10 11–12 13–14 15–16 17–18
Pitch	20 x 15 m
Equipment	6 bibs, 4 cones, 2 balls, 1 small goal
Duration	total: 19 min play:2 x 7 min breaks: 2 min
Author	SJ Weber

Description

- Split players into two teams and assign each player a number within their team.
- Set up a small field with a goal outside it; teams play possession inside the field to keep the ball from the opposition.
- The coach calls a number at random moments during play.
- The two players with that number immediately leave the field and play 1v1 for the outside goal.
- After a goal is scored, both players rejoin the field and play continues until the next number is called.

Coaching Tips

1. Before starting, **ask players to predict what will be hardest** - staying in the game, or reacting fast when their number is called.
2. When a player is slow to react to their number, **use it afterward as a noticing moment**: what were they focused on instead?
3. Encourage players to **stay engaged with the main game** rather than only listening for their number, since both matter.

Learning Objectives	Reflection Questions
1 Players use a cue of their own to switch on when their number is called.	○ *What did you use to switch on when you were called?* ○ *What made it hard to stay ready when it was not?* ○ *Did you build a signal of your own, or wait for the coach?*
2 Players move between watching the whole field and focusing on the ball when their number comes.	○ *How quickly could you switch your focus when your number was called?* ○ *Which was harder, the wide view or the narrow one?*
3 Players describe what pulled their attention away while they were waiting.	○ *What pulled your attention away during the game?* ○ *What did you notice in your body before you were called?* ○ *Where is your attention when nothing happens near you?*

Training

13-14 years



3.4. Stage 4 (13-14 Years)

3.4.1. Stage characteristics

Players can now sustain focus even with mild external disturbance for short periods, and their growing capacity for abstract thought allows them to understand the concept of mindfulness itself, not just practise it. Awareness of their own body continues to deepen, and group discussion of individual experiences becomes a valuable part of learning.

3.4.2. Specific learning objectives

At this stage, players can sustain focus through mild distraction and are ready to understand, in their own words, what mindfulness and concentration actually involve.

During the reflection phase, the players should be able to:

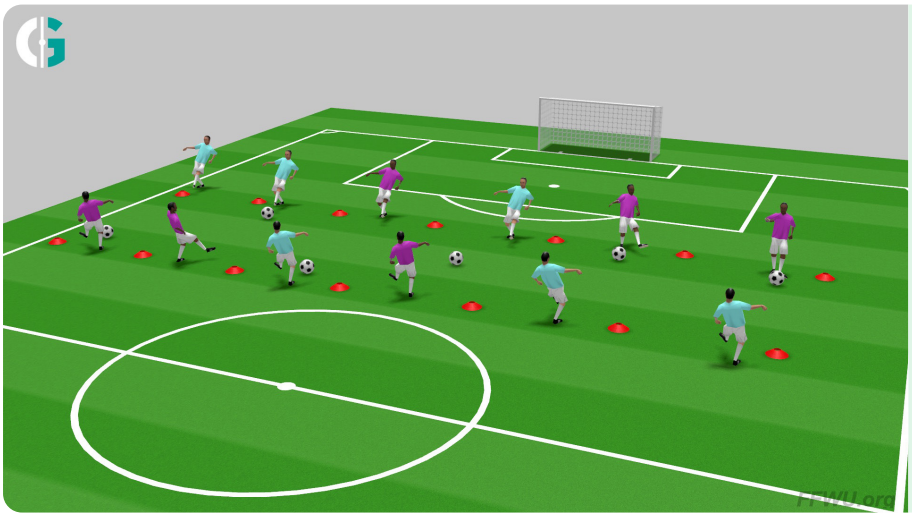
1. Keep attention on the game through a mistake.
2. Explain why a focusing strategy works.
3. Notice a physical or emotional state without acting on it.

3.4.3. Coach insight

This is a good stage to introduce brief explanation alongside practice, because players can now understand why a strategy works and not only how to carry it out. Group discussion after an exercise matters as much as the exercise itself: hearing that teammates lose focus in the same moments removes the sense that being distracted is a personal weakness.

EXERCISE

NUMBER JUGGLING



Players	12+
Age	07–08 09–10 11–12 13–14 15–16 17–18
Pitch	50 x 40 m
Equipment	6 balls
Duration	total: 15 min play: 12 min breaks: -
Author	SJ Weber

Description

- Players work in pairs, one player is throwing the ball and the other player is passing the ball back.
- Assign numbers to different body parts (left foot = 1, right foot = 2, right thigh = 3, left thigh = 4).
- One player calls a number before the pass is returned; the ball must be played back using the matching body part.
- Change the instructing player every 5-10 passes.
- Once players are comfortable, add more numbers (up to 7), change the numbers for the different body parts or add more body parts.

Coaching Tips

1. Introduce the „Loud Music“ variation once players are comfortable: **play music they are unlikely to enjoy** through a speaker to train sustained focus under distraction.
2. When a player passes with the wrong body part, **treat it as information** about where their attention was, not as a mistake to correct sharply.
3. Ask players afterward which body part or number was **hardest to keep track of**, and why.

	Learning Objectives	Reflection Questions
1	Players stay accurate on the numbers after playing one with the wrong body part.	○ *What did you do straight after playing the wrong body part?* ○ *What helped you stay accurate after getting one wrong?* ○ *Did one mistake make the next few harder?*
2	Players explain why their way of keeping track of the numbers works.	○ *What does concentration mean to you after doing this drill?* ○ *What makes mindfulness different from concentration?* ○ *Why is it harder when the number comes late?*
3	Players notice the tension or frustration as more numbers are added, and keep trying.	○ *How did your body react as the numbers increased?* ○ *Did the music pull your attention away?* ○ *What did you feel just before you lost the sequence?*

Training

15-16 years



3.5. Stage 5 (15-16 years)

3.5.1. Stage characteristics

Awareness at this stage extends beyond the body to the mind itself, and players are ready for longer, more structured meditation-style practices. Concentration can be maintained and deliberately returned to a primary task even in environments that include genuine disturbance, reflecting growing independence in self-regulation.

3.5.2. Specific learning objectives

At this stage, players are extending their awareness from the body to the mind itself, and can begin to hold concentration through real, meaningful disturbance.

During the reflection phase, the players should be able to:

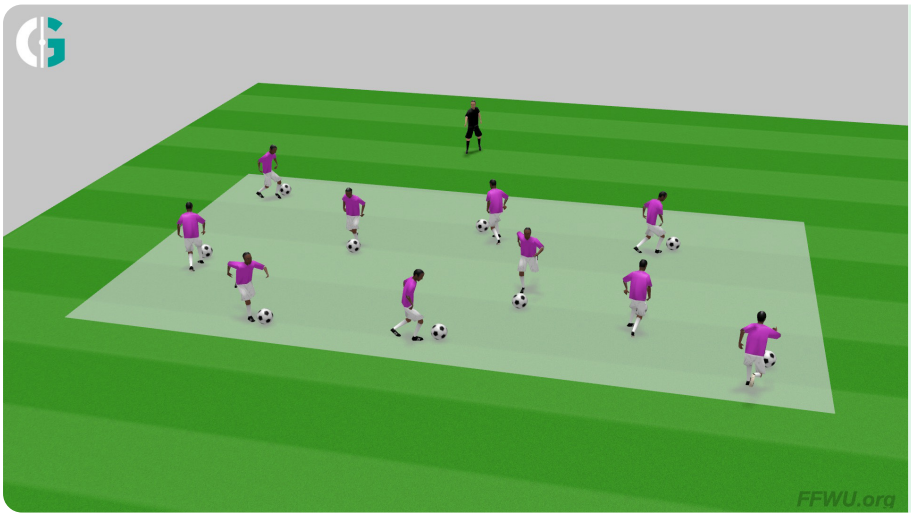
1. Adapt a focusing technique to what works for them.
2. Hold attention under competitive pressure.
3. Choose where to direct their attention before a decisive action.

3.5.3. Coach insight

Players at this stage can largely regulate their own attention given the right structure, and can begin to take ownership of the process. Offer a framework rather than a fixed script, and let players adapt techniques to what actually works for them. What works varies more between individuals here than at any earlier stage, and one prescribed routine wastes that.

EXERCISE

THE WHISTLE DRILL



Players	6+
Age	07–08 09–10 11–12 13–14 15–16 17–18
Pitch	15 x 15 m
Equipment	1 ball per player, 6 cones, 1 whistle
Duration	total: 15 min play: 12 min breaks: -
Author	SJ Weber

Description

- Set up a space with cones sized to the number of players, one ball per player.
- Players dribble freely within the space, keeping the ball close.
- The coach uses whistle signals to trigger specific actions (e.g. one blow = stop the ball and turn using the sole; two blows = cut the ball underneath the body to change direction).
- Increase the number of signals as players become comfortable.
- Players must continue dribbling smoothly between signals, staying alert for the next one.

Coaching Tips

1. Vary the timing of whistle blows unpredictably so **players cannot anticipate them**, keeping attention genuinely active rather than routine.
2. When a player reacts to the wrong signal, **use it as a chance** to discuss what pulled their attention elsewhere in that moment.
3. Gradually increase pace and the number of signals only once the group is **consistently** reacting correctly.

Learning Objectives	Reflection Questions
1 Players build their own way of resetting after missing a whistle signal.	○ *What routine or process did you use to reset your focus?* ○ *Did having a plan of your own make it easier to recover?* ○ *What would you change about your reset next time?*
2 Players keep the ball under control while listening for the next signal.	○ *How did you keep ball control while listening to the whistle?* ○ *What happened to your focus as the signals came faster?* ○ *Which mattered more to you, the ball or the whistle?*
3 Players decide what to listen and look for before the next signal comes.	○ *What did you decide to look at before the next signal?* ○ *What thoughts went through your mind after missing one?* ○ *Did deciding in advance make the next signal easier?*

Training

17-18 years



3.6. Stage 6 (17-18 years)

3.6.1. Stage characteristics

Players are capable of sustaining attention on their external environment, their body and their own mind in almost any situation, and can apply the theoretical underpinnings of mindfulness and concentration independently. At this stage, players are also increasingly able to help create the calm, focused environment that supports concentration in others.

3.6.2. Specific learning objectives

At this stage, players can sustain attention in almost any situation and are ready to extend that competence outward, supporting the focus of others around them.

During the reflection phase, the players should be able to:

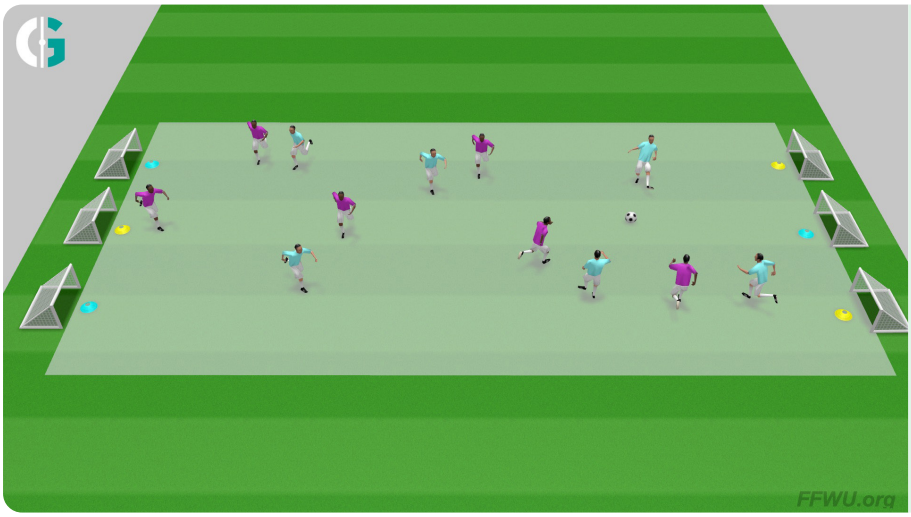
1. Regain focus within the same passage of play after a setback.
2. Keep a settled state that teammates can read.
3. Lead a short focusing routine for the group.

3.6.3. Coach insight

At this stage the goal shifts from developing a player's own attention to extending it outward, modelling calm focus for younger or less experienced teammates. Give them real responsibility for it, such as leading a brief team-focus routine themselves. Attention is the competence players are most often asked to hold on behalf of others, and this is where that begins.

EXERCISE

MULTI-GOAL CONCENTRATION GAME



Players	12+
Age	07–08 09–10 11–12 13–14 15–16 17–18
Pitch	30 x 20 m
Equipment	12 bibs in two colours, 6 cones, 6 mini-goals, 1 ball
Duration	total: 25 min play: 3 x 6 min breaks: 2 min
Author	SJ Weber

Description

- Split players into two teams, each with a different colour of bibs.
- Set up three goals on each side of the field, colour-coded to match the teams (e.g. two blue and one red on one side, two red and one blue on the other).
- Teams may only score in goals matching their own bib colour.
- Scoring in a goal of the wrong colour awards a goal to the opponent instead.
- Play a normal small-sided game under these rules, requiring players to track colour and position constantly.

Coaching Tips

1. Before starting, ask players to identify which goal colours belong to which team, **checking genuine understanding** rather than assumption.
2. When a player scores in the wrong goal, **treat it as a concentration moment** to discuss afterward rather than purely a tactical error.
3. Encourage more **experienced players to briefly remind teammates** of the goal colours during play, practising focus-leadership.

	Learning Objectives	Reflection Questions
1	Players get back into the game after scoring in the wrong colour goal.	○ *What did you do after scoring in the wrong goal?* ○ *How long did it take to get back into the game?* ○ *What did your teammates do that helped?*
2	Players stay settled enough that teammates can still play off them under the colour pressure.	○ *What strategy did you use to manage everything going on?* ○ *What made it hardest to keep track of the right goals?* ○ *How did your state affect the players near you?*
3	Players lead a short focusing routine for their team before a round starts.	○ *What did you say or do to help a teammate stay focused?* ○ *Did you notice teammates helping you in the same way?* ○ *What would you use with the whole team before kick-off?*

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